

Department of Veterans Affairs

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documents within the Department pursuant to this section is restricted to VA employees (including consultants and contractors of VA) who have a need for such information to perform their government duties or contractual responsibilities and who are authorized access by the VA medical facility Director, Regional Director, the Under Secretary for Health, or their designees or by the regulations in §§ 17.500 through 17.511.

(b) To foster continuous quality improvement, practitioners on VA rolls, whether paid or not, will have access to confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents relating to evaluation of the care they provided.

(c) Any quality assurance record or document, whether confidential and privileged or not, may be provided to the General Counsel or any attorney within the Office of General Counsel, wherever located. These documents may also be provided to a Department of Justice (DOJ) attorney who is investigating a claim or potential claim against the VA or who is preparing for litigation involving the VA. If necessary, such a record or document may be removed from the VA medical facility to the site where the General Counsel or any attorney within the Office of General Counsel or the DOJ attorney is conducting an investigation or preparing for litigation.

(d) Any quality assurance record or document or the information contained therein, whether confidential and privileged or not, will be provided to the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General upon request. A written request is not required.

(e) To the extent practicable, documents accessed under paragraph (b) of this section will not include the identity of peer reviewers. Reasonable efforts will be made to edit documents so as to protect the identities of reviewers, but the inability to completely do so will not bar access under paragraph (b).

(f) No individual shall be permitted access to confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents identified in § 17.501 unless such individual has been informed of the penalties for unauthorized disclosure.

Any misuse of confidential and privileged quality assurance records or documents shall be reported to the appropriate VHA official, e.g., Service Chief, Medical Center Director.

(g) In general, confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents will be maintained for a minimum of 3 years and may be held longer if needed for research studies or quality assurance or legal purposes.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

§ 17.509 Authorized disclosure: Non-Department of Veterans Affairs requests.

(a) Requests for confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents from organizations or individuals outside VA must be made to the Department and must specify the nature and content of the information requested, to whom the information should be transmitted or disclosed, and the purpose listed in paragraphs (b) through (j) of this section for which the information requested will be used. In addition, the requestor will specify to the extent possible the beginning and final dates of the period for which disclosure or access is requested. The request must be in writing and signed by the requestor. Except as specified in paragraphs (b) and (c) of this section, these requests should be forwarded to the Director of the facility in possession of the records or documents for response. The procedures outlined in 38 CFR 1.500 through 1.584 will be followed where applicable.

(b) Disclosure shall be made to Federal agencies upon their written request to permit VA's participation in healthcare programs including healthcare delivery, research, planning, and related activities with the requesting agencies. Any Federal agency may apply to the Under Secretary for Health for approval. If the VA decides to participate in the healthcare program with the requestor, the requesting agency will enter into an agreement with VA to ensure that the agency and its staff will ensure the confidentiality of any quality assurance records or documents shared with the agency.

(c) Qualified persons or organizations, including academic institutions,

engaged in healthcare program activities shall, upon request to and approval by the Under Secretary for Health, Regional Director, medical facility Director, or their designees, have access to confidential and privileged medical quality assurance records and documents to permit VA participation in a healthcare activity with the requestor, provided that no records or documents are removed from the VA facility in possession of the records.

(d) When a request under paragraphs (b) or (c) of this section concerns access for research purposes, the request, together with the research plan or protocol, shall first be submitted to and approved by an appropriate VA medical facility Research and Development Committee and then approved by the Director of the VA medical facility. The VA medical facility staff together with the qualified person(s) conducting the research shall be responsible for the preservation of the anonymity of the patients, clients, and providers and shall not disseminate any records or documents which identify such individuals directly or indirectly without the individual's consent. This applies to the handling of data or information as well as reporting or publication of findings. These requirements are in addition to other applicable protections for the research.

(e) Individually identified patient medical record information which is protected by another statute as provided in § 17.502 may not be disclosed to a non-VA person or organization, including disclosures for research purposes under paragraph (d), except as provided in that statute.

(f) Under paragraph (b), the Under Secretary for Health or designee or under paragraph (c), the Under Secretary for Health, Regional Director, medical facility Director, or their designees may approve a written request if it meets the following criteria:

- (1) Participation by VA will benefit VA patient care; or
- (2) Participation by VA will enhance VA medical research; or
- (3) Participation by VA will enhance VA health services research; or
- (4) Participation by VA will enhance VA healthcare planning or program development activities; or

(5) Participation by VA will enhance related VA healthcare program activities; and

(6) Access to the record by the requester is required for VA to participate in a healthcare program with the requester.

(g) Protected quality assurance records or documents, including records pertaining to a specific individual, will for purposes authorized under law be disclosed to a civil or criminal law enforcement governmental agency or instrumentality charged under applicable law with the protection of public health or safety, including state licensing and disciplinary agencies, if a written request for such records or documents is received from an official of such an organization. The request must state the purpose authorized by law for which the records will be used. The Under Secretary for Health, Regional Director, medical facility Director, or their designees will determine the extent to which the information is disclosable.

(h) Federal agencies charged with protecting the public health and welfare, federal and private agencies which engage in various monitoring and quality control activities, agencies responsible for licensure of individual health care facilities or programs, and similar organizations will be provided confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents if a written request for such records or documents is received from an official of such an organization. The request must state the purpose for which the records will be used. The Under Secretary for Health, Regional Director, medical facility Director, or their designees will determine the extent to which the information is disclosable.

(i) JCAHO (Joint Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Organizations) survey teams and similar national accreditation agencies or boards and other organizations requested by VA to assess the effectiveness of quality assurance program activities or to consult regarding these programs are entitled to disclosure of confidential and privileged quality assurance documents with the following qualifications:

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(1) Accreditation agencies which are charged with assessing all aspects of medical facility patient care, e.g., JCAHO, may have access to all confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents.

(2) Accreditation agencies charged with more narrowly focused review (e.g., College of American Pathologists, American Association of Blood Banks, Nuclear Regulatory Commission, etc.) may have access only to such confidential and privileged records and documents as are relevant to their respective focus.

(j) Confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents shall be released to the General Accounting Office if such records or documents pertain to any matter within its jurisdiction.

(k) Confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents shall be released to both VA and non-VA healthcare personnel upon request to the extent necessary to meet a medical emergency affecting the health or safety of any individual.

(l) For any disclosure made under paragraphs (a) through (i) of this section, the name of and other identifying information regarding any individual VA patient, employee, or other individual associated with VA shall be deleted from any confidential and privileged quality assurance record or document before any disclosure under these quality assurance regulations in §§17.500 through 17.511 is made, if disclosure of such name and identifying information would constitute a clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy.

(m) Disclosure of the confidential and privileged quality assurance records and documents identified in §17.501 will not be made to any individual or agency until that individual or agency has been informed of the penalties for unauthorized disclosure or redisclosure.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

§ 17.510 Redisclosure.

No person or entity to whom a quality assurance record or document has been disclosed under §17.508 or §17.509 shall make further disclosure of such record or document except as provided

for in 38 U.S.C. 5705 and the regulations in §§17.500 through 17.511.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

§ 17.511 Penalties for violations.

Any person who knows that a document or record is a confidential and privileged quality assurance document or record described in §§17.500 through 17.511 and willfully discloses such confidential and privileged quality assurance record or document or information contained therein, except as authorized by 38 U.S.C. 5705 or the regulations in §§17.500 through 17.511, shall be fined not more than \$5,000 in the case of a first offense and not more than \$20,000 in the case of each subsequent offense.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 5705)

VA HEALTH PROFESSIONAL SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

AUTHORITY: 38 U.S.C. 7601-7655.

§ 17.600 Purpose.

The purpose of §§17.600 through 17.612 is to set forth the requirements for the award of scholarships under the Department of Veterans Affairs Health Professional Scholarship Program to students receiving education or training in a direct or indirect health-care services discipline to assist in providing an adequate supply of such personnel for VA and for the Nation. Disciplines include nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy, and other specified direct or indirect health-care disciplines if needed by VA.

[55 FR 40170, Oct. 2, 1990]

§ 17.601 Definitions.

For the purpose of these regulations:

(a) *Acceptable level of academic standing* means the level at which a student retains eligibility to continue in attendance in school under the school's standards and practices in the course of study for which the scholarship was awarded.

(b) *Act* means the Department of Veterans Affairs Health-Care Amendments of 1980, Pub. L. 96-330, (38 U.S.C. 7601-7655), as amended by Pub. L. 97-251, the Department of Veterans Affairs Health-Care Programs Improvement